



Information Technology Assessment and Plan for the Southwest Region

Introduction

Broadband high-speed Internet access is transforming Nebraska's economy and society. Businesses are using the technology to become more efficient, reduce costs, expand their markets and increase revenues. New technologies are expanding social opportunities and enhancing quality of life for Nebraskans.

In response to these changing conditions, communities are seeking ways to become "e-communities," defined as communities that are aware of their diverse information technology needs and that strategically plan to use these technologies to meet their economic, community and social development needs in the future. Leadership of e-communities is also planning how to use information technology to recruit and retain youth and grow businesses.

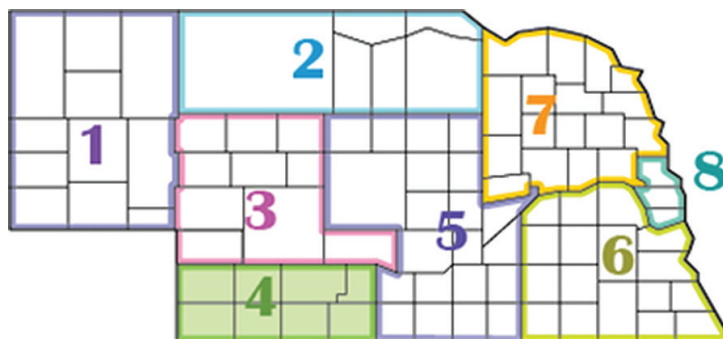


Figure 1. The Southwest region of Nebraska

Planning Process

This report summarizes the current priorities and goals for the Southwest region, which comprises the counties of Chase, Dundee, Hayes, Hitchcock, Frontier, Red Willow, Gosper and Furnas (see Figure 1).

The information gathering process for this report started with a regional forum in April 2011. This event brought 44 attendees from across the region together to learn about the Nebraska Broadband Mapping and Planning Initiative. Survey results from an initial household survey were shared, and the statewide map was introduced (see Figure 2).

Additionally, the Southwest region team participated in conference calls in March and April 2012, with five to 10 participants on each call. A team meeting followed in August 2012. Four focus groups provided additional information and feedback during 2012 and 2013. Focus groups have been effective at increasing interest and conversation around broadband. Providers who have attended recognized the importance of providing educational programs on broadband use. As a result of the focus groups discussions, the planning team recognized that providers are beginning to communicate more with each other and some are actively engaged with farmers and other rural residents to find creative ways to provide broadband access. See the section at the end of this report, Techniques for Information Gathering.

Household Survey Results (2010) for Region

The 2010 household survey found that location matters in broadband adoption. About 67 percent of residents in the Southwest region have adopted broadband compared to 76 percent statewide and 82 percent of metropolitan households. Statewide, most households expressed satisfaction with the reliability, speed and support of their Internet

service. However, less than one-half (49%) of Southwest region residents were satisfied with the speed of their Internet service, compared to 70 percent of Omaha residents.

Just over one-third (35%) of Southwest region residents are satisfied with the types of Internet services available in their community, compared to 43 percent in the Omaha metro area. Just over two in 10 (21%) Southwest region residents think the current services are very adequate for attracting new residents or for future generations. Statewide, 46 percent of households say there are free public “hotspots” available in their community; 30 percent of Southwest region residents say they have free public “hotspots” in their community.

Mapping Wireline and Wireless Coverage in Nebraska

The Nebraska Broadband Mapping Project provides statewide coverage maps, available online at *broadband.nebraska.gov/mapping*. The State of Nebraska created this site to offer information regarding broadband availability and planning activities to its citizens. Collaboration among the state and federal government, broadband providers and community organizations, makes possible an up-to-date representation of broadband availability through an interactive map.

The map in Figure 2 shows wireline and wireless coverage for the state of Nebraska. The green shading represents the fixed wireless coverage; blue represents mobile wireless coverage; red represents DSL wireline coverage; lavender represents fiber wireline service; and orange represents cable wireline coverage. The interactive map allows users to select individual service options or see combinations, with county and regional boundary indications. In addition, the map includes the option to gauge available Internet speed and identify provider options by address. More details on mapped service coverage are included in the guide at the left of the state map. Unshaded areas represent the unserved areas of the state.

The map shows that the majority of the Southwest region is covered by cable, DSL, fiber or fixed wireless in addition to mobile wireless.

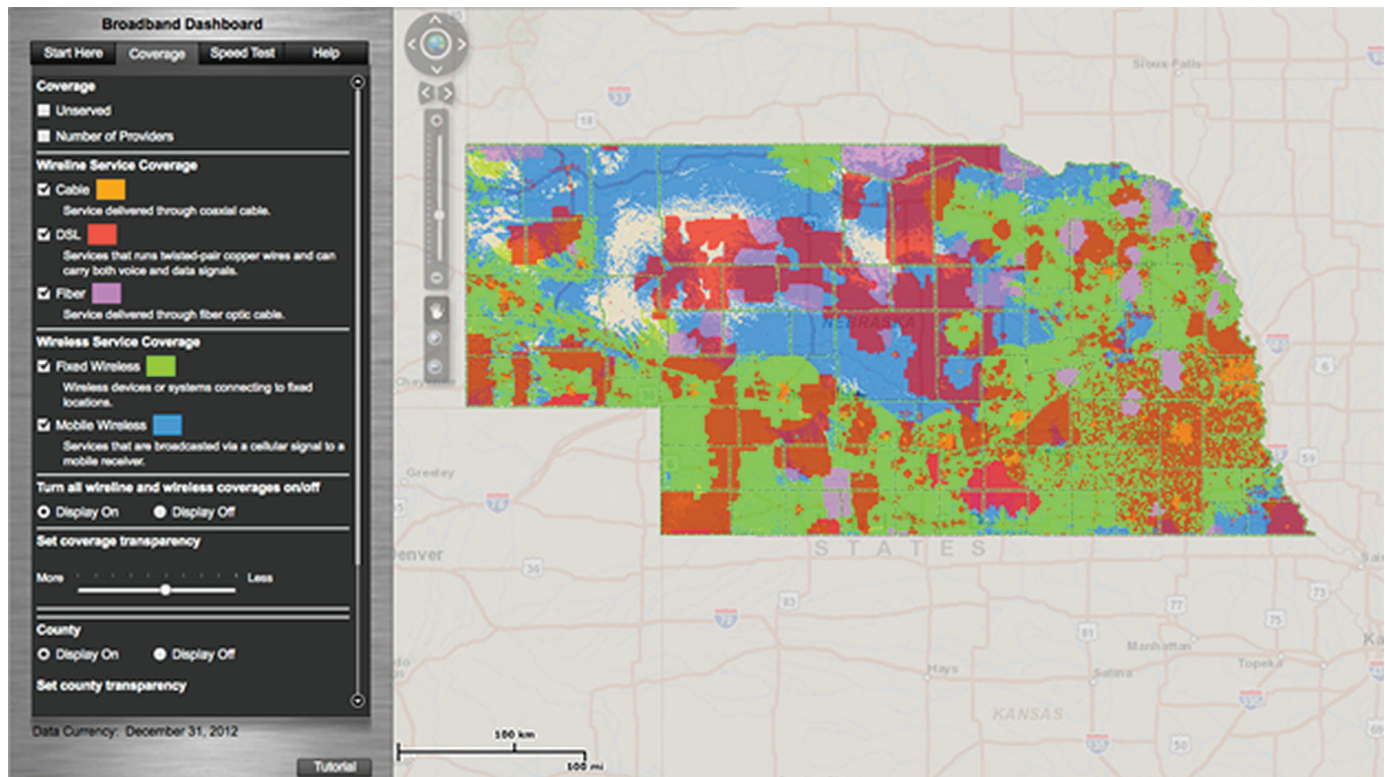


Figure 2. Broadband wireline and wireless coverage in Nebraska

The map in Figure 3 provides a better view of areas in the Southwest region that are currently unserved (dark purple shading). According to the metrics collected to identify served and unserved areas, the Southwest region has very few locations that are unserved. While areas of the region may be pushing for higher speeds, overall there are options for broadband.

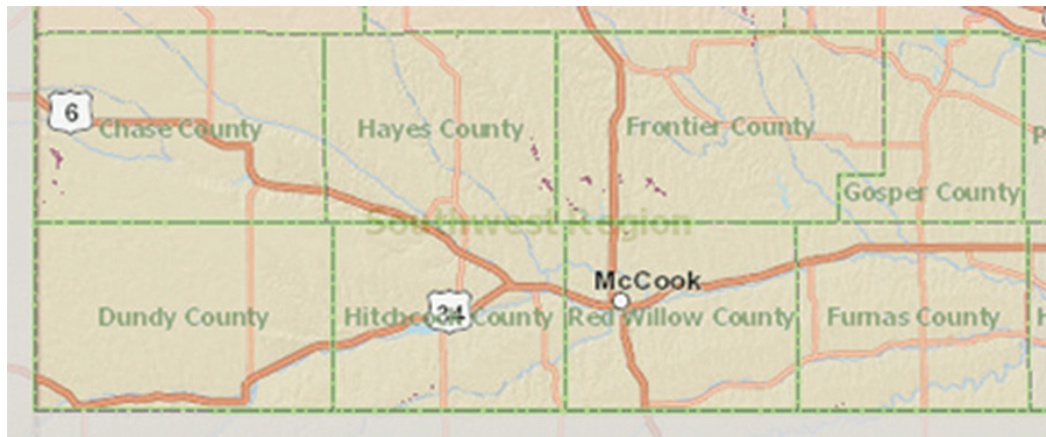


Figure 3. Unserved areas in the southwest region (no broadband services available in purple shaded area.)

Southwestern Region Broadband Vision Statement and Goals

Residents, businesses and local governments will have access to digital information, communication tools and applications that transform and enhance social and economic opportunities in this predominantly rural area of southwest Nebraska.

To move this vision forward, the Southwest Regional Planning team determined there was a need for businesses and residents to recognize and understand the important benefits offered by access to affordable and reliable broadband technologies. Three priority areas and initial actions to increase the knowledge and use of broadband technology were identified and are discussed below.

Priority Areas

Priority 1: Digital Literacy and Adoption — *Collaborate with libraries and others to provide individual and small group training on the use of broadband; promote awareness and adoption through the news media, including papers and newsletters.*

Priority 2: Economic Development — *Increase the number of business, including agribusinesses and agricultural producers that utilize broadband technology. Efforts will include working with chambers of commerce and providing educational opportunities.*

Priority 3: Local Government — *Identify options to expand the usage of broadband technology including training.*

Digital Literacy and Adoption

The region has identified digital literacy and adoption as priorities. These efforts will support broadband access and promote awareness and adoption of broadband services.

Brief summary of strengths, issues and needs

The planning team believed there were reasonable resources and outlets for technology training. McCook Community College, Bellevue University, Mid-Plains Community College and Central Community College were identified as potential partners with service providers, Chambers of Commerce, libraries and businesses to provide targeted technology training. Some of these courses are or could be offered online.

Action Plan

1. Build partnerships with community colleges, libraries, chambers of commerce, service providers, businesses and others to provide individual and small group training on the use of broadband.
 - Increase awareness of hours of availability at the above locations.
 - Hold classes or instruction times to teach people what they “need” or “want” to know, individually or in small groups.
 - Provide small businesses information and education on developing and effectively utilizing a digital presence for their organization.
2. Provide news releases and information to media outlets to educate the public and increase awareness of the benefits of having access to and using broadband to enhance productivity and quality of life.
 - Opportunities exist to expand broadband awareness through written material, flyers, radio, newspaper articles, individual teaching opportunities and small group lessons.
3. Recognize and provide outreach to people who need new access and skills for Nebraska state services, including SNAP and health care.
4. Identify unmet needs of individuals and businesses and help connect with possible sources.
5. Host displays at county fairs and other events to promote broadband awareness and use.
 - Review available materials and update.
 - Provide brochures and information available for each event promoting broadband adoption and utilization and upcoming educational opportunities.
 - Extension Educator will prepare and provide information to various groups and individuals. They will expand the distribution of this information to other groups.

Economic Development

The region has identified economic development and e-commerce activities as priorities. Anticipated outcomes would be to increase the number of business, including agribusinesses and agricultural producers, that utilize broadband technology.

Brief summary of strengths, issues and needs

The regional team identified several positive indications that broadband access is being considered and can be adopted as a business tool.

Strong economic development groups are active in McCook, Cambridge, Imperial and Benkelman. They understand the need to actively pursue and use new technologies. The economic development staff is available to help increase awareness and opportunities in broadband usage.

Organizations such as Plains Ag, Ag Valley, Frenchman Valley, Twin Valley Public Power are potential partners in working with businesses, service providers and other entities to increase the adoption and utilization of broadband.

It was noted that many area farmers are learning how to use broadband to improve farming practices. Some area irrigators have already adopted broadband technologies integrating online controls in irrigation units to comply with regulations relating to the Republican River basin water usage guidelines and agreements.

Action Plan

1. Facilitate and promote education and training to businesses regarding how to claim and market their digital presence. Identify and utilize available resources to help businesses maximize their digital presence.
2. Determine ways to provide educational opportunities at low cost to residents and businesses.
3. Engage economic development organizations throughout the regions asking them to help identify and promote the advantages that effective broadband access can offer.
4. Regional Team members or others interested in moving these efforts forward should be identified and could serve as speakers at business functions, chambers of commerce, community and civic organization meetings and economic development events.
 - Have brochures, cards and flyers readily available for distribution.
 - Prepare a short presentation that can be expanded as needed.
5. Work with tourism groups to promote the use of online access at tourist destinations.
6. Promote utilization of resources made available through the UNL Broadband Initiative team to evaluate current online status and improve online business options and performance. Recognize and understand what is available in the region and share news with public.
7. Use UNL Extension Educators to support educational goals and promote awareness of technology uses in the Ag sector especially precision agricultural technologies.
8. Work with ag-related business to identify and provide advanced technology training for farmers and ranchers.
9. Develop a mentoring system to aid those who are considering adopting or adapting to the changing technologies.
10. Enter into discussions with service providers regarding expanded bandwidth options, services and applications for businesses, farmers and residents in the region.

Local Government

This region identified local government as the third priority. The goals in this priority area will focus on identifying opportunities for broadband adoption in local governments, schools and health care services. This is important as many applications and services for constituencies are being provided online.

Brief summary of strengths, issues and needs

Counties are being encouraged to keep their county web sites up to date. Most communities in the region have civic representation on the Internet. Some communities and counties have Web pages promoting their communities and services.

The League of Municipalities and the Nebraska Association of County Officials (NACO) were identified as potential partners to stimulate the adoption and expanded use of the Internet in schools, libraries and local government offices.

A recent survey indicated that NACO members in nonmetropolitan counties are less likely than members in metropolitan counties to see broadband services being used effectively in their counties for reducing costs of government operations. In addition, not many NACO members see broadband being used somewhat or very effectively in their county. However, most NACO members agree that access to high-speed Internet service is helping residents accomplish certain items, including access to financial services (74%), reach high education levels (66%), improve job skills (64%), get health information (62%) and find a job (52%).

Although counties would like to expand online services, some counties have indicated that budgets and staffing are obstacles.

Local schools have expressed a need to increase bandwidth and other broadband services to expand educational offerings. Affordable broadband is a factor for many schools.

Action Plan

1. Facilitate opportunities to demonstrate and illustrate with best practice examples how broadband adoption and utilization can improve their communities.
2. Meet with county and city offices to determine their need for assistance in keeping current with technology resources, or if needs are recognized and exist.
3. Work with communities to determine the need for a community Website.
4. Work with organizations and partners to provide training to citizens to comply with new and online forms requirements and other government regulations. Identify and help employees meet skill levels necessary to adopt and use online technology.
5. Determine the possibility of meeting with commissioners, city councils, library boards, economic development groups and service organization such as the Rotary, Kiwanis and Lions to discuss broadband needs and opportunities.
6. Train key staff in city and county offices to recognize needs and available resources.
6. Work through Nebraska Association of County Officials (NACO) to identify trends, issues and areas for improvement in local government offices and staffs.

Conclusion

This document reflects the current status and identifies future broadband technology needs of the Nebraska Broadband Initiative Southwestern Region. The content has been developed with the input and assistance of residents of the Southwestern region. Changes to this plan will occur due to the dynamic nature of the technologies and the implementation of the action plans. Your input and feedback may stimulate and contribute to updates in the regional plan. Share feedback on this plan with Nancy Frecks, Southwestern Regional Coach, by phone at 308-334-5666, or by email at nfrecks1@unl.edu

This process is fluid and dynamic, and this report is intended to capture its status only at this point in time. This evolution will continue.

Southwest Region Team Representation

Member Name	Group represented	Area
Lynn Witte	Telecommunications	Furnas County
Philip Jensen	Great Plains Communications	Western Half of Nebraska
Kevin Poppe	Great Plains Communications	SW Nebraska
Rob Henry	Commercial Engineering	SW Nebraska
Bruce McDowell	McCook City Council	McCook
Rex Nelson	McCook Economic Development	McCook Trade Area
Randall Raile	BW Telcom	SW Nebraska
Dustin Ladenburger	Ag Producer & Hitchcock County Zoning	Hitchcock/Dundy County
Brad Moline	ALLO Communications	Rural Nebraska
Beth Fella	Imperial Public Library	Chase County

Techniques for Information Gathering

Activity	Audience Size	Date of Contact
Southwest Regional Forum	44	April 7, 2011
Team Conference Call	5-10	March 28, 2012
Team Conference Call	5-10	April 25, 2012
Team Meeting	5-10	August 2012
Focus Groups	25	March 3-4, 2013
Cambridge, McCook, Benkelman, and Imperial		
One-on-one calls, discussions	10-20	2012-2013

For additional information, contact:
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References

Internet Connectivity and Use in Nebraska Survey.

http://liferaydemo.unl.edu/c/document_library/get_file?uuid=32e75940-6288-401e-93a4-9a3ebd8a2398&groupId=4583971&pdf

Engaging People. Linking the World Broadband Planning Workbook

http://broadband.nebraska.gov/c/document_library/get_file?uuid=d7b74d0f-c89b-4c74-907d-ec3331eebb03&groupId=1874&pdf

NACO Broadband Survey

http://liferaydemo.unl.edu/c/document_library/get_file?p_l_id=4583975&folderId=4821488&name=DLFE-61290.pdf



The Nebraska Broadband Initiative

This Broadband Mapping and Planning Initiative is funded through a grant to the Nebraska Public Service Commission by the U.S. Department of Commerce's National Telecommunications and Information Administration and aims to increase broadband adoption and utilization.

Project partners include the University of Nebraska, Nebraska Department of Economic Development, Nebraska Information Technology Commission, Nebraska Public Service Commission, and the AIM Institute.